

THE COHESIVE POWER OF IGNORANCE.

BY FRANK CRANE.

IT is not what we know, but what we do not know, that binds us together; that is, the spiritual conglutinate of the race is ignorance.

Men are found in certain groups; sects, which we say are united by a creed; parties, rallied to a platform of principles; cults, drawn together by a common enthusiasm; schools, unified by a dominant literary, artistic or social enthusiasm. But our language is superficial. It is not what the individual units of these aggregates see, but what they do not see, that gives solidarity. Ignorance is the welding heat.

The best political watch-word is one which nobody understands. I once heard a famous politician lecture on free silver. He took up his argument with much show of elementary clearness and logic. I heard several say at the close that it was a "masterly address, so simple, so plain." I flatter myself that I am a person of average intelligence, and I give you my word that I could not make head nor tail out of his reasonings. Much humiliated at the time, I have since comforted my soul by the discovery that the kind of oration which most imposes itself upon an audience is one wherein the speaker subtly feeds the vanity of his hearers by propounding utterly incomprehensible things with an air of assuming that of course all present understand him perfectly.

The tariff, being a complicated matter, which cannot be understood without long familiarity with practical business and a thorough grasp of political economy, which two things not one in a thousand men has, is admirably adapted for a party slogan. The very shrewdest and wisest business men disagree upon it. Hence the crowd loves to dogmatize about it, for what they lack in knowledge they can make up in noise and positiveness. An involved issue, like the tariff, poured down upon *hoi polloi*, acts upon them as a powerful

stimulant, very much as the oxygen gas with which Dr. Ox, in one of Jules Verne's stories, submerged a dull Dutch town, and quickened the people into enterprise and war, the like of which history had not recorded.

The power of the party boss resides in the ignorance of the voters. Why do you vote the straight party ticket? Because, when you take your ballot from the clerk at the polls, and run your eye down the list of candidates, you discover that you know few or none of them, and in sheer refuge from indecision you vote for every name marked with your party's sign. Party leaders understand this. They depend upon it for success. And they build upon no sand.

An army moves with machine-like precision only when each soldier understands nothing save to obey. General intelligence of the general's plans would be fatal to discipline. An army of Napoleons would crumble into inefficiency.

Our law holds true even in the more intimate relations. Friendship strains and breaks under too great intimacy. Love cannot live without its purple haze.

In how many instances has there been perfect union of souls during courtship, and estrangement after marriage! The wisdom of ages has crystallized this truth into an adage: "Familiarity breeds contempt." A certain inexpugnable reserve is essential to a happy union. The lover is never so at one with his mistress as when she appears to him in the veil of a glorified fancy, as Beatrice to Dante. It would be well if some admonishing spirits stood by the lover's elbow, as the *tre donne* stood by Dante, to warn him:

"Tanto eran gli occhi miei fissi ad attenti,
così lo santo riso
 a sè traiali con l'antica rete;
 Quando per forza mi fu volto il viso
 vèr la sinistra mia da quelle dèe,
 perch' io udià da loro un "Troppo fisso!"

Purgatorio xxxii.

It is because men plunder the reserves of the personality with irreverent greed that love ceases to attract and begins to repel. That is why

"All men kill the thing they love!"

When you have pillaged the holy of holies you hate the temple. The youth, in Schiller's "Veiled Statue at Sais," though repeatedly warned, yet resolved to lift the veil, and to know the truth which the oracle declared to be there concealed. He raised the veil; he saw the truth; but what he had seen he told no man.

"Auf ewig

War seines Lebens Heiterkeit dahin,

Ihn riss ein tiefer Gram zum frühen Grabe!"

The higher you ascend in the order of spiritual cohesion the more vividly this law is apparent. And so nowhere is it more marked than in religion. The great ethnic religions rely upon the ignorance of their followers for their strength. Perhaps the most absolute hierarchy of history was the Egyptian priesthood, which owed its long authority to the controlling power of its mystery and esoteric darkness upon the popular mind. And in Brahmanism, Buddhism and Mahometanism we see the same paralyzing dynamic of ignorance.

Of Christian sects easily the most coherent is the Roman, which has so impressed its infrangible solidarity upon the world's imagination, and which still shows such undiminished unity, that Macaulay, in his wellknown *mot*, pictures it as still persisting, when the New Zealander contemplates the ruins of English civilization from the broken arches of the London Bridge. And the first principle of the Roman organization is not the dissemination of intelligence among the masses, nor the development of private judgment.

With the advent of an effort to enlighten the common herd, came the breaking of Christianity into sects. The informed mind protests. Hence, protestantism. In vain protestants seek to make their churches as solid as the Roman. Their basal cause of existence is fatal to unity. Acting in the direction of its origin, the force of protestantism ever tends to disintegrate; to perfect its spirit it must destroy its organization; while the Catholic Church naturally moves onward in increasing centralization. Which of the two systems is better for the world, the reader may judge for himself, but there can be no two opinions as to which is the better for itself. We must define our aim. If the goal of Christianity is to get every soul eventually into the Church, then the Roman plan is the better. If on the contrary Christianity's triumph mean the ultimate diffusion of certain principles of life, to be worked out by each individual in his own way, then the Protestants are logical. But there are many Romanists in Protestant Churches, and many Catholics have really been Protestants.

Even with the widest interpretation of religion, however, it still remains true that the perpetuity of "the faith," that is, the continued existence of a belief in and a reliance upon the infinite and the unseen, hangs not upon what we know, but upon those things that are unknown, and that can never be known. It is herein

that the future of religion is secure. The secret of the universe, the nature of God, the destiny of man, the hereafter, these must remain in their original shadow, defying every attempt to define them. "I am that I am," said Jehovah, and left us still groping toward His face and name. The heart stands before the universe as before the ocean; our little boats of speculation come and go, but the boundless expanse stretches ever away to meet the sky. It is this unfading mystery that gives religion its hold on man. What we understand we trample underfoot, and ask new riddles. What baffles us forever, we seek forever. "The things seen are temporal; the things unseen are eternal."

For within us is an unexplored country, "mountains of the moon," region of perpetual fog and impenetrable wilderness. To ourselves we are deeply unknown. And out of this unknown region in us come our greatest passions, our profoundest aspirations. The infinite being within us, we can never reverence anything outside of us except it has a like infinity. Explanations have their day, but the sombre river of the utterly inexplicable flows on forever. In this stream we would fain bathe. The secret of the universe is beautiful, but it is darkly beautiful,—evasive, alluring.

Now the perpetuity of religion is assured chiefly by this truth. For the unknown is infinitely greater than the known. What we know not is "that great sea of nescience upon which all our science floats as a mere superficial film." Forever will "lame hands of doubt" reach out toward the mysteries of the Infinite Father, the Cross, Eternal Life.

So are we sweetly bound together and to God by our limitation. Science, criticism, knowledge, "puffeth up," enlarges but isolates the soul. Love, worship, "buildeth up," cementing as it uplifts us.

The soul faints ever for the unknowable. The chief unknowable is Love, hidden always to reason, melting us together by its strange power. Love draws us each to each as to a shelter from the infinite. Because we are so ignorant of the wild waste of waters we call Life, we fix our eyes on God, as upon a pole-star.

Not in the sense in which it is commonly understood, but in a deeper, truer sense, is "Ignorance the mother of Devotion."